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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTERVENTION ON BEHALF OF PROTESTANTS
IN QUANG NINH AND OTHER RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Ambassador visited Quang Ninh Province October 17-19. During this visit he discussed religious freedom issues with the People's Committee and met with Protestant and Catholic leaders. Police harassed the Protestants prior to the Ambassador's visit, but his intervention with the Committee resulted in a police apology to the Protestants and commitments to register their heretofore-unregistered congregation. The Ambassador also visited the priest of the local Catholic church, who noted that only five priests serve Quang Ninh's (potential) ten parishes because the local authorities have prevented the Bishop from assigning more priests. General shortage of priests is also a problem, the priest reported. Another difficulty the priest described is the recovery of a number of Catholic Church properties in the Province that are now used as local housing. However, he asserted that the situation for the growing number of Catholics in Quang Ninh has improved dramatically since the church reestablished its presence in 1989.

¶2. (SBU) Summary continued: The Protestants' difficulties in Quang Ninh were a clear illustration of the GVN's continuing difficulties with enforcing local implementation of central policies on Religious Freedom, but the rapid solution demonstrated that a small amount of pressure on local authorities can positively change their behavior. Catholic officials offered the valuable insight that the number of Protestants in Quanh Ninh is relatively small, and has a large percentage of refugees who converted to Protestantism in refugee camps in Hong Kong before being returned to Vietnam. These refugees are an automatic source of suspicion to Vietnamese police because of their previous efforts to seek refugee status. Quanh Ninh Catholics are far better off, despite their difficulties in training and assigning priests to parishes. The problem over ecclesiastical properties is not likely to be settled anytime soon. End Summary.

Problems Right Away in Meeting Protestants

¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador traveled to Quang Ninh Province from October 17-19. Prior to this visit, the Embassy formally requested permission from the People's Committee for the Ambassador to meet with Catholic and Protestant leaders in Halong City to learn more about any Religious Freedom difficulties faced by their followers in this usually less-problematic region. The Quang Ninh People's Committee immediately granted permission to meet with Catholic leaders but expressed dismay over the request to meet with Protestants because it had not been part of the original trip agenda, though they did not outright reject the request.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador planned to meet with Protestant leaders to learn more about the refusal of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North's (ECVN) June request to the local Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) to register a House Church of 30 believers in Halong City. On Sunday, October 16, twenty-four hours before the Ambassador's party departed for the Province, the ECVN informed poloffs that their followers had been hassled by plain-clothes police at their place of worship that morning. That evening, officers questioned individual leaders in their homes and made vague threats about future "problems" if they persisted in meeting with the Ambassador.

¶5. (SBU) Before departing for Quang Ninh on the morning of October 17, poloffs conveyed the Ambassador's strong displeasure about these developments directly to the foreign relations officer of the Provincial People's Committee and reiterated his desire to meet with the local Protestants. On arrival in the Province, the Ambassador met with People's Committee Vice Chairwoman Nhu Thi Lien at a welcome dinner. In addition to other issues reported septels, the Ambassador expressed his concerns regarding freedom of religion in Quang Ninh, noting that although the United States and Vietnam may not see eye-to-eye on the issue of religious freedom, it is important that Vietnam work to improve its record on religion. In particular, he praised the new religious framework and the Prime Minister's "Instruction on

Protestantism" issued in March which set out clear guidelines and instructions for the registration of religious groups. He said he was therefore surprised to hear that a protestant congregation in Quang Ninh that had wanted to establish a church in Halong City had been refused permission to do so. The Ambassador said he was also concerned to hear that leaders of that group had been harassed and threatened by police because he had asked to meet with them, especially since this gave the impression to others in Quang Ninh that the local authorities considered the Protestants' activities illegal or at least questionable. He added that he hoped that these were the actions of overzealous police rather than efforts carried out under official instruction from the provincial government. The Ambassador concluded by reiterating his desire to meet with the Protestants.

16. (SBU) Vice Chairwoman Lien responded that the Quang Ninh Provincial Government has been working to implement the GVN's new policies on religion in the province. She noted that the CRA wants to help congregations register and renovate their places of worship and has taken steps to allow groups to collect donations from the local populace to rebuild churches. As for the specific request from the Evangelist Protestants, the CRA received a delegation in June from ECVN, at which meeting the CRA indicated it would create the "most favorable conditions possible" for the registration of this group. However, the CRA has been unable to register the church since then because the ECVN application "remains incomplete." Nevertheless, Lien stated her expectation that, in the end, the CRA will help the group complete its application and registration as instructed by the Prime Minister. She also emphasized that a lack of a decision on this application was not necessarily a negative response and should not be interpreted as such. In conclusion, Lien expressed her belief that the police officers in question likely were "only seeking greater understanding of Protestantism" so local authorities could "work to improve their situation." She made no objection to the Ambassador meeting with the Protestants the following morning.

17. (SBU) On October 18, the Ambassador received seven members of the Protestant congregation led by Mr. Ngo Ba Tan at his hotel in Halong. The hotel and security staffs were under instructions to "register" the seven before they were allowed to meet with the Ambassador. When challenged about this new requirement, the hotel staff claimed that all such guests coming to meetings at Quang Ninh hotels were required to present their identification and register with the front desk, however they later admitted that this was false. The Ambassador insisted that registrations were unnecessary and pulled the group into the meeting. Only three of the seven were registered. A representative of the Quang Ninh People's Committee tried to observe the meeting but respected the Ambassador's request for a private discussion.

18. (SBU) Tan explained that their group of thirty believers and lay pastors, from twenty families, has met in Halong City for the last ten years. Many of them were arrested from time to time in the past, he reported, but the number of arrests has fallen as GVN religious policy changes. In June, the Protestants decided to try and register their congregation because of this perceived improvement. ECVN applied on their behalf for both the right to register the group and the right to send an ECVN Pastor from Hanoi to preach to them. (The CRA refused to accept an application from the group themselves). Both ECVN applications were rejected exactly 45 days after the required waiting period with a message that the applicants did not fulfill the "required conditions" for application. Despite repeated requests, the CRA refused to explain what these conditions were.

19. (SBU) The Protestants asserted that since their applications were submitted, they have faced continuous troubles with local public security officials. These troubles included more barriers against gathering for worship and numerous late night visits from police officers and public security officials. The officials informed members of the congregation that their activities were illegal because their application to register had been officially denied. They also visited relatives of followers to try and extort a list of the congregation from non-members and to discourage them from associating with their Protestant relations. Finally, the landlord of their place of worship was instructed to stop allowing the Protestants to meet in his building. The group has thus returned to meeting in secret, making "the situation worse than it was before our application". Tan noted that there have been no outright arrests since the new laws on religion were promulgated earlier this year; however, this continued harassment showed that the police have found new ways to keep pressure on them. Summing up, he said the CRA may continue to make promises to help the Protestants, but public security officials will continue to block their

registration.

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador thanked the Protestant leaders for this information and reviewed his conversation with the People's Committee from the previous evening. He noted that the Embassy will monitor the Protestants' situation in Quang Ninh and encouraged the group to reapply for registration and continue to work with the local CRA and with ECVN in Hanoi to make this happen, but also to reach out to other diplomats and international organizations to make sure their case is heard and approved. International attention might change their situation for the better, he said. The Ambassador also promised to raise the Protestants' situation with higher officials in the government, including members of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS).

¶11. (SBU) Five hours after this conversation, Tan informed poloffs that the Protestants were visited by the same security officials that had hassled them the previous evening right after their conversation with the Ambassador; however, the officers' tone was now "totally different." They inquired politely about the substance of the Protestants' meeting with the Ambassador and apologized for any previous offense they might have given, especially the evening before. The ECVN confirms that since this apology, the Protestants in Quang Ninh have not been harassed in any way. They also report that the local CRA held a meeting, after the Ambassador's visit, with all government agencies concerned with the Protestant issue in Quang Ninh to work out a "common position" on the ECVN's application, but could not say what this new position is.

Catholics

¶12. (SBU) Also on October 18, the Ambassador visited Father Doan Thanh Vung at Hon Gai Parish church. Father Vung explained that the church was originally established by the French in 1930 for people working in the Quang Ninh Coal mines, but was destroyed by U.S. bombing in 1967 and rebuilt with assistance from the U.S. Embassy under Ambassador Peterson and from foreign contributions. Vung has been assigned to Hon Gai parish for thirteen years and actually splits his time between the 3000 followers in Hon Gai and 3,500 followers in Cam Pha parish. He noted that at present there are only five priests serving Quan Ninh's nine parishes and 40,000 parishioners. There is also a sizable island with 500-600 believers off shore that in reality should be its own parish. Vung stated that the local authorities have prevented the Bishop in Haiphong from assigning more priests to the Province, though he noted that the general shortage of priests is also a problem. In addition, the GVN has refused to allow the establishment of any cloisters or other holy orders in the Province, although some young people have been able to go to seminary in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Another problem facing the parish is the recovery of a number of church properties in Halong city that are now used as local housing. The church is negotiating with the CRA to recover these and other ecclesiastical properties, but have not been successful. However, despite these problems, Father Vung asserted that in his and other priests' opinions the situation for the growing number of Catholics in Quang Ninh has improved dramatically since the church reestablished its presence in 1989 after a forty-year hiatus. The priests meet on a monthly basis to compare notes and coordinate ministry efforts, including programs to assist the high number of HIV/AIDS victims in the Province.

¶13. (SBU) The Ambassador asked if the priests had any relationship with the small number of Protestants in Halong City. Father Vung stated that the few "tens of families" of Protestants are a new phenomenon for the area. Most of these people are either immigrants from other parts of Vietnam or returnees from refugee camps in Hong Kong where they converted to Protestant Christianity. Vung observed that this newness coupled with the general suspicion of returned exiles were the main reasons why the local authorities had not yet allowed the Protestants to register an official place of worship. He said that the priests do not have any formal contact with them; however, they do meet on a personal basis around Christmas and Easter.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The harassment of a Protestant congregation over their application to register with the CRA per government regulations, and especially the harassment before the Ambassador's meeting with the group, is quite surprising for such a forward looking province, but is likely heavily affected by the population of "politically unreliable" returned asylum seekers in the Protestant community. This is particularly striking when compared with the favorable conditions enjoyed by the Catholics in Quang Ninh. This is a clear illustration of the GVN's continuing difficulties with enforcing local implementation of central policies on Religious Freedom. On the other hand, it is also clear from this example that a small amount of

attention from the Embassy can exert strong pressure on local authorities to change their behavior. The GVN seems committed, at least in the short term, to making real efforts to satisfy our Religious Freedom concerns, though the issue of the disposition of ecclesiastical properties currently being used for housing is not likely to be settled anytime soon. End Comment.

BOARDMAN